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KINDRED SPIRITS

A Catholic Wind in the White House

By Daniel Burke

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Shortly after Pope Benedict XVI's election in 2005, President Bush met with a small circle of advisers in the Oval Office. As some mentioned their own religious backgrounds, the president remarked that he had read one of the new pontiff's books about faith and culture in Western Europe.

Save for one other soul, Bush was the only non-Catholic in the room. **But his interest in the pope's writings was no surprise to those around him.** As the White House prepares to welcome Benedict on Tuesday, many in Bush's inner circle expect the pontiff to find a kindred spirit in the president. Because if Bill Clinton can be called America's first black president, some say, then George

W. Bush could well be the nation's first Catholic president.

This isn't as strange a notion as it sounds. Yes, there was John F. Kennedy. But where Kennedy sought to divorce his religion from his office, Bush has welcomed Roman Catholic doctrine and teachings into the White House and based many important domestic policy decisions on them.

"I don't think there's any question about it," says **Rick Santorum**(Opus Dei, Knight of Columbus), former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and a devout Catholic, who was the first to give Bush the "Catholic president" label. **"He's certainly much more Catholic than Kennedy."**

Bush attends an Episcopal church in Washington and belongs to a Methodist church in Texas, and his political base is solidly evangelical. Yet this Protestant president has surrounded himself with Roman Catholic intellectuals, speechwriters, professors, priests, bishops and politicians. These Catholics—and thus Catholic social teaching—have for the past eight years been shaping Bush's speeches, policies and legacy to a degree perhaps unprecedented in U.S. history.

"I used to say that there are more Catholics on President Bush's speechwriting team than on any Notre Dame starting lineup in the past

half-century,” said former Bush scribe—and Catholic—William McGurn.

Bush has also placed Catholics in prominent roles in the federal government and relied on Catholic tradition to make a public case for everything from his faith-based initiative to antiabortion legislation. He has wedded Catholic intellectualism with evangelical political savvy to forge a powerful electoral coalition.

“There is an awareness in the White House that the rich Catholic intellectual tradition is a resource for making the links between Christian faith, religiously grounded moral judgments and public policy,” says **Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest and editor of the journal *First Things* who has tutored Bush in the church’s social doctrines for nearly a decade.**

In the late 1950s, Kennedy’s Catholicism was a political albatross, and he labored to distance himself from his church. Accepting the Democratic nomination in 1960, he declared his religion “not relevant.”

Bush and his administration, by contrast, have had no such qualms about their Catholic connections. At times, they’ve even seemed to brandish them for political purposes. Even before he got to the White House, Bush and his political guru Karl Rove invited

Catholic intellectuals to Texas to instruct the candidate on the church's social teachings. In January 2001, Bush's first public outing as president in the nation's capital was a dinner with Washington's then-archbishop, Theodore McCarrick. A few months later, Rove (an Episcopalian) asked former White House Catholic adviser Deal Hudson to find a priest to bless his West Wing office.

"There was a very self-conscious awareness that religious conservatives had brought Bush into the White House and that [the administration] wanted to do what they had been mandated to do," says Hudson.

To conservative Catholics, that meant holding the line on same-sex marriage, euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research, and working to limit abortion in the United States and abroad while nominating judges who would eventually outlaw it. To make the case, Bush has often borrowed Pope John Paul II's mantra of promoting a "culture of life." Many Catholics close to him believe that the approximately 300 judges he has seated on the federal bench—most notably Catholics John Roberts and Samuel Alito on the Supreme Court—may yet be his greatest legacy.

Bush also used Catholic doctrine and rhetoric to push his faith-based initiative, a movement to open federal funding to grass-roots religious groups that provide

social services to their communities. Much of that initiative is based on the Catholic principle of “subsidiarity”—the idea that local people are in the best position to solve local problems. “The president probably knows absolutely nothing about the Catholic catechism, but he’s very familiar with the principle of subsidiarity,” said H. James Towey, former director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives who is now the president of a Catholic college in southwestern Pennsylvania. “It’s the sense that the government is not the savior and that problems like poverty have spiritual roots.”

Nonetheless, Bush is not without his Catholic critics. Some contend that his faith-based rhetoric is just small-government conservatism dressed up in religious vestments, and that his economic policies, including tax cuts for the rich, have created a wealth gap that clearly upends the Catholic principle of solidarity with the poor.

John Carr, a top public policy director for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, calls the Bush administration’s legacy a “tale of two policies.”

“The best of the Bush administration can be seen in their work in development assistance on HIV/AIDS in Africa,” says Carr. “In domestic policy, the conservatism trumps the compassion.”

And other prominent Catholics charge the president with disregarding Rome's teachings on the Iraq war and torture. But even when he has taken actions that the Vatican opposes, such as invading Iraq, Bush has shown deference to church teachings. Before he sent U.S. troops into Baghdad to topple Saddam Hussein, he met with Catholic "theocons" to discuss just-war theory. White House adviser Leonard Leo (Knight of Malta), who heads Catholic outreach for the Republican National Committee, says that Bush **"has engaged in dialogue with Catholics and shared perspectives with Catholics in a way I think is fairly unique in American politics."**

Moreover, people close to Bush say that he has professed a not-so-secret admiration for the church's discipline and is personally attracted to the breadth and unity of its teachings. A New York priest who has befriended the president said that Bush respects the way Catholicism starts at the foundation—with the notion that the papacy is willed by God and that the pope is Peter's successor. "I think what fascinates him about Catholicism is its historical plausibility," says this priest. "He does appreciate the systematic theology of the church, its intellectual cogency and stability." The priest also says that Bush "is not unaware of how evangelicalism—by comparison with

Catholicism—may seem more limited both theologically and historically.”

Former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson, another evangelical with an affinity for Catholic teaching, says that the key to understanding Bush’s domestic policy is to view it through the lens of Rome. Others go a step further.

Paul Weyrich, an architect of the religious right, detects in Bush shades of former British prime minister Tony Blair, who converted to Catholicism last year. “I think he is a secret believer,” Weyrich says of Bush. Similarly, John DiIulio, Bush’s first director of faith-based initiatives, has called the president a “closet Catholic.” And he was only half-kidding.

daniel.burke@religionnews.com

Daniel Burke is a national correspondent for Religion News Service.